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In Medias Res

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Keywords: contemporary art, medievalisms, *biennale*, materialisms, nonmodern, anachronic, chronopolitics

Summary

As contemporary artistic practice has become ever more polymorphous and multispatial, large scale exhibitions have accommodated a wider array of emerging nonmodern epistemologies, materialities and temporalities ‘in the middle’ (Latour and Porter 1993, 47). As a critical means of considering contemporary art’s homologous nonmodern, this paper refracts these two influential global exhibitions of contemporary art - *dOCUMENTA 13* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* - through the lens of Medievalisms Studies. Medievalisms Studies’ challenge to the ‘simplified binarization of premodern acts and modern identities’ (Fradenburg 1997, 213) invites deeper scrutiny of contemporary art’s knowledges, materialities and its chronopolitics.

Developing the medievalist analogies of the compendium and the relic, I focus on specific *exempla* presented within the curatorial frameworks of these two key *biennale* that offer a macrocosmic discourse on contemporary art’s developing relations with knowledges, materials and time. In unfolding anachronic materialist narratives, a nonmodern sensibility promised to liberate emerging art from the social constructivist paradigms that still dominate contemporary art. As a corollary of their nonmodern materialist epistemologies, the *biennale* that form my *exempla* also attempted to (dis)place the practices they curated through a

polytemporality in which now-and-then and here-and-there are intertwined.

Within global art exhibitions in the first half of the 2010s, a proclivity to structure and embody knowledge, materiality and time in *nonmodern* ways was very evident. In some cases, contemporary art's nonmodern proclivities could be characterised as explicit practices of 'medievalization' (Prendergast, 2007), purposefully mining of the medieval epoch 'for specific philosophical vocabularies, social formations, and systems of thought' (Holsinger 2005, 14).

Equally, contemporary *biennale* could be said to host 'residual' (Matthews 2015, 19) medievalisms, recurring nonmodern events that structure social relations.¹ Since they are vestigial, these opaque medievalisms 'are as resistant to change as we know other mentalities and collective memories to be.' (Utz 2017, 50) Of late, residual medievalisms have surfaced in ways that encourage us to identify possible continuities and untimely transgressions between contemporary art and its premoderns.²

While medievalization explicitly manifests current concerns and plays its part in shaping our reception of the middle ages, residual medievalisms are premodern practices that have remained implicit in culture (Latour and Porter 1993), thereby largely evading our attention. I seek to examine three medievalisms that are both explicit and implicit - *compendia*, *relic-ing*, and *asynchrony* as dominant concerns of the world's two major expositions of contemporary art: Documenta and La Biennale di Venezia. *Compendia* and *relic-ing* lend their nonmodern voices to a recent preoccupation with making knowledge material, while *asynchrony* focuses attention on how such materially-embodied knowledge structures time.

I will begin here with an example of a ‘medievalization’ that is frequently proffered in biennaleology,³ namely, that the global *studium biennale* imagines itself to share the mission of the nascent *universitas*. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s *dOCUMENTA (13)* (Kassel, 9 June - 16 September, 2012) and Massimiliano Gioni’s *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* (La Biennale di Venezia, 1 June - 24 November, 2013) dramatised their epistemological challenges in ways that openly courted comparison with transformative demands placed upon the European *universitas* in the 12th century.

The 11th century *universitas* pursued a comprehensive, polymathic understanding of the seven *artes liberales* as ‘preparatory to divine contemplation.’ (Barnish 1998) Since the corpus was believed to be finite, scholars could ‘include everything known about a subject by compressing it into smaller, discrete, and ostensibly more manageable units.’ (Steiner 2015, 76) Global expositions, such as *La Biennale di Venezia* (1895-), were, equally, founded upon the assumption that artistic knowledge was finite. *Biennale*, thus, could legitimately form the temporary locus for a modern *peregrinatio academica* (Ridder-Symoens 1991, 280), a mobile community of artists and devoted cultural pilgrims.

For more than a century, international *biennale* operated as “passion parks”, cultivating their own *nationes* (Kibre 1948) in the form of pavilions wherein audiences assemble to study the fruits of the world’s artistic fiefdoms. Herein people can (virtually) venerate art works from around the globe - without having to travel to their many sites of production - and engage with likeminded guests through the *biennale*’s numerous scholarly publications and programme events. It is through such a temporary assemblage of art, artists and their audiences that *biennale* expositions were designed to incorporate art as a *universal compendium*.

In gathering together a variety of knowledges, *biennale* inevitably perform a geopolitical function, acting to “globalise” the corpus that they represent through a process of canonisation. Modernist internationalism - the aim to unite humanity through the formation of a common epistemological framework - formed the *raison d’être* of early 20th century *biennale*. Today’s global expositions, such as Documenta and La Biennale di Venezia continue to playing an ecclesiastical role in supranational relations with local *compagnon* that is geopolitically *neomedieval*. (Cerny 2004)

The challenge for the *universitas* was greatly enhanced as the European corpus dilated with the addition of translations of Arabic scholarship in the 12th century. “There is no doubt that after these translations appeared, the collected literature became too copious for any single teacher to cope with.” (Pedersen 1998, 122). The specialist *studium generale* was the European *universitas*’ institutional response to a corpus that, in learning from the *madrasa* of the muslim world, expanded very rapidly, threatening to engulf the *artes liberales* canon and its academic practices (Platonism, the Scholastic method).

Similarly, the range of specialist practices, knowledges and technologies developed by artists exploded globally in the late 1960s. “Centres” proliferated in what were once considered to be (modern) art’s “margins”; *institutionkritik* interrogated colonial curatorial assumptions and challenged modernist ‘epistemicide’ (Santos 2018, 276). A corollary of the field of contemporary art decolonising and diversifying *its* repertoire, was that, like the medieval *studium generale*, it began to endlessly multiply into a myriad of specialist *disciplina* in the form of artistic ‘intermedia’ (Higgins 1997). This made it impossible to retain a singular *universal* curatorial apparatus - such as modernism - that could support and

represent art's copiousness. The parallels with 'encyclopedism and scholastic ways of knowing' are cautionary. Mary Franklin-Brown notes: 'The encyclopedists tried diverse solutions to the problems of organizing a universal compendium. Predictably, those who attempted the most comprehensive treatment of human knowledge experienced the greatest difficulty.' (Franklin-Brown 2012, 39)

Whether tasked with programming *dOCUMENTA (13)*'s gargantuan 100 day curriculum of ancillary events and the publication of 100 books of miscellany or confronting "the impossibility of knowing everything" (Massimiliano Gioni in Bonami 2013) - the monumental scale⁴ of today's *biennale* is a corollary of the central paradox of compendiousness apparent to 12th century scholars: "the compendium makes information accessible by repackaging it into smaller units, but, in so doing, often becomes unwieldy, imbalanced, or redundant." (Steiner 2015, 75). Insofar as they both dramatised the circular comprehension of all knowledge, *dOCUMENTA (13)* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* only did so in full recognition that contemporary art's ever expanding field actually denies the possibility of universalism. In their attempts to incorporate the biotic and non-artefactual to voice overtly ethical concerns, *dOCUMENTA (13)* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* presented themselves as "compendia", boldly offering a macrocosmic discourse on *everything* through specific qualities of microcosmic *things* (be they art works, plants, animals or stones....) Since the compendia medievalization was most explicit in *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia*, I will now turn to focus on it.

Featuring 150 artists from 38 countries, *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* was a deliberate provocation, an *imagined* palace in which to (affect) to witness the whole corpus, not just an exhibition of emerging art, but a presentation of all things.⁵ Gioni's recursive application of 'numerousness' as a 'rhetorical device' (Madoff 2013, 91) reflected contemporary art's

incongruent expansionist-specialist aspirations. As a curator, Gioni's embrace of *compendiousness* was explicitly motivated by self-taught Italian-American artist Marino Auriti's desire to display the corpus of knowledge in its entirety in his *Palazzo Enciclopedico del Mondo* (1955)⁶, an imaginary museum 'bringing together the greatest discoveries of the human race, from the wheel to the satellite.' (Massimiliano 2013) Gleaning an overtly ethical and allegorical discourse on other/worldly matter, the *Palazzo Encyclopedia* programme established its continuities with 'circular' medieval *compendia* - such as Hrabanus Maurus' *De rerum naturis* (842-47) - rather than with the proto-scientific taxonomies of early modern encyclopaedia. Gioni's curatorial strategy thus might be said to reframe the 'allegorical impulse' (Owens 1980) of contemporary art as recommencing premodern allegorical practices - such as *figura*, *glossa* and *compilatio*, and *ordo* (Franklin-Brown 2012, 5) - that had been temporarily neglected by modernists.

Il Palazzo Encyclopedia was a litany of compendious films, photographs, videos, bestiaries, labyrinths, performances and installations, each duplicating and reinforcing something of Gioni's own systematic curatorial vision in microcosm. Canonical exhibits included: Roger Caillois' expansive surrealist collection of rare geodes (Caillois 1985); Dieter Roth's, *Solo Scenes*, (3rd March 1997-28th April 1998) a huge stack of 131 monitors showing uninterrupted video of Roth's everyday routines unfolding in Bali, Iceland and Basel during the final year of his life; and Fischli/Weiss's epic *Plötzlich diese Übersicht* (1981–2012) consisting of some 350 tiny unbaked clay sculptures handcrafted to depict minor events in history, sport and culture that, collectively, imagine an idiosyncratic 'overview' of the world (Fischli 2015). *Plötzlich diese Übersicht* perhaps most perfectly encapsulates the compendium medievalization, a vast collection very specific *exempla* assembled to offer insight into macrocosmic phenomena.

It is fitting that *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* also featured an abundance of non-artworks and collections compiled by non-artists. Indeed, Gioni's attachment to the visual-somatic anthropology of Hans Belting (Belting 2011) necessitated the heterogeneous accumulation of unschooled artists (Shinichi Sawada, Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern), visionaries (Rudolf Steiner), occultists (Aleister Crowley), artist-mystics (Hilma af Klint), psychoanalysts (Carl Jung's *The Red Book*) and idiosyncratic collectors (Hugo Bernatzik).

...the exhibition becomes a type of anthropological research in which the artwork and other forms of figurative expression are treated in a similar manner, which is frequently done in museums devoted to other periods and fields, but for some reason it's not something we do when it comes to contemporary art. (Massimiliano Gioni in Bonami 2013, 168)

While this superficially resembled European modernism's othering of the 'primitive' and *primitif*, (Morowitz 2014) Gioni's *modus operandi* - to excessively proliferate genres and stretch art's epistemological boundaries to breaking point - is decidedly *nonmodern*. Rather than offer a neatly arranged comprehensive perspective on all that it surveyed, *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* collated and compounded tottering piles of stuff, a succession of litanies united only in their compendiousness.

A *nonmodern* compendiousness is embodied in two of *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia*'s most celebrated *exempla*: Camille Henrot's Silver Lion-winning video-installation *Grosse Fatigue* (2013, 13mins) and Mark Leckey's flat-pack touring exhibition-within-an-exhibition *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (Leckey 2013).

In Henrot's *Grosse Fatigue*, slam poet Akwetey Orraca-Tetteh rapidly unfolds a tale of the universe and the rise and fall of humanity. An exhaustive flurry of densely layered images, many sourced from the Smithsonian Institute's archives, are superimposed as a palimpsest of pop-up windows. Rather than posit a rupture in historical time, *Grosse Fatigue*'s breakneck layering of objects and animals as *figura* enables us to contemplate pasts-present. Figuring knowledge as embodied in objects in the 'long-now'⁷, *Grosse Fatigue* echoes the surrealism promulgated and practised by George Bataille in his short-lived journal *DOCUMENTS* (1929-30) (Ades 2006). Herein, Bataille led surreal experiments in 'interventionist medievalism' (Holsinger 2005, 27), premodern practices of *compilatio* defamiliarised and repurposed as avant-garde collage. *Grosse Fatigue* performs something akin to Bataille's 'compilatio, which brings competing discourses into contact in texts that have been woven from citations of other texts and are thus both old and new.' (Franklin-Brown 2012, 5)

Where Henrot deploys *figura* to invoke *compilatio*, Leckey literally and metaphorically deploys the medieval reliquary as a means of presenting "enchanted" objects for our veneration. Curated by Leckey, ...*Dumb Things* is a *tableau vivant* of ancient objects, videos, machines, medical devices, props, smartware, and modern works of art.⁸ A *Cyberman Helmet* (1985) from the BBC TV series *Doctor Who* accompanies a 13th century Singing Gargoyle; a 13th century *Hand Reliquary* ensconced in a glass vitrine waves at an adjacent *Touch Bionic i-Limb Ultra* (2012) prosthetic hand. Leckey's signature greenscreen setting can be digitally chromakeyed to superimpose and rescale such exhibits against any *mise-en-scène*. While ostensibly dislocating the exhibits by suspending them in an anachronic everywhere, the greenscreen is a shape-shifting *châsse*, an ambient field 'to be played like an

instrument’ (Mulholland, 2011) that has the potential to virtually implace its “relics” in any imagined space-time. Since it licences the exhibited nodes to form many different networks, the greenscreen embodies innumerable possibilities for *compilatio*. Leckey, thus, artfully curates the objects as a cybernetic celebration of their agency or ‘thing-power’ (Bennett 2010, 3), as an assemblage of embodied ‘realist magic’ (Morton, 2013) that may re-assemble in perpetuity (Delanda 2016).

Henrot and Leckey’s works similarly conjoin matter, sensation and thought across the ‘modern partition’ (Latour and Porter 1993, 99). Spurning established taxonomies of post-Renaissance encyclopedic archives, they produce metaphorical juxtapositions and animate superimpositions that are distinctly *nonmodern*. As if speculating on what might constitute a nonmodern system of the arts (Kristeller 1951), Henrot and Leckey share something of Gioni’s embrace of the *long-durée* exhibitionary complex. To this end, their work both resembles and incorporates the *exempla* of premodern compendia.

Il Palazzo Encyclopedia placed a great deal of emphasis on the *material* embodiment of knowledge. From a nonmodern perspective, the compendium’s deployment of microcosmic *exempla* to relay macrocosmic knowledge of all things bears a resemblance the materialist method of chronicling the whole through the part practiced in ‘object-biography’. Established by the behavioural archeologist Michael Schiffer (Schiffer 1972) and popularised by the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (Kopytoff 1986), object-biography forms part of a broader material cultural turn against processual archaeology. Object-biography focuses not only on the technological processes of fabrication, but on the use, servicing, and disposal of things.

Object-biography is a well established practice in the artworld, wherein it forms

something akin to an artistic research method (Farquharson 2012), one that allows artists, curators and their audiences to (co)investigate the enculturation of a/biotic matter.⁹ The medieval historian Patrick Geary has applied ‘Kopytoff’s suggestion that one examine the career or biography of objects as they pass from ordinary remains to treasured relics, and then perhaps back again.’ (Geary 1986, 177). Relics were forms of matter composed of, or that had come into contact with, cult persons. Since such association enabled them to carry the *virtus* of a cult figure (Hahn 2010, 290), authenticating their provenance was of vital importance.

Geary notes that the elevation of mere matter into thaumaturgic person-objects required the continual ritual attention of its devotees. ‘Following the positive recognition of the relics’ authenticity was a public ritual known as the “elevation,” in which the relics were formally offered to the public for veneration.’ (Geary 1986, 177). The liturgical practise of ‘elevation’ is a residual medievalism implicit in the secular forms of ‘world-making’ (Goodman 1978) that are constitutive of art post-dada.¹⁰ Dada’s provocative deployment of ephemera drew collective attention to the fact that there are no pre-sanctioned “artistic materials” that confirm we are in the presence of art. Since dada triggered this post-medium condition in European art, works of contemporary art have been constituted in a far greater variety of matter, processes, events and schemes than was previously deemed possible. This does not mean that anything is, or might become, a work of art. Until they are convincingly entangled with art’s existing intersubjective networks, becoming-artworks remain propositions. Potential works of art, thus, must be ceremoniously, and widely exhibited in public to solicit the veneration of an artworld.

According to Arthur Danto, the ‘artworld’ (Danto 1964) hosts liturgical practices that ‘transfigure’ commonplace matter (Danto 1981) into art¹¹. Danto’s ‘artworld’ is shorthand for

the co-constituted world-making activities of artists, critics, curators, directors, producers, collectors and audiences that elevate mere “stuff” into the stuff of art. Similarly, as the medievalist Cynthia Hahn puts it: ‘without some form of recognition, a relic is merely bone, dust, or scraps of cloth. An audience is essential. Its attention authenticates the relic.’ (Hahn 2010, 291) Of course, as this attention inevitably wanes, then some of what we currently consider to be artworks, like objects that were once venerated as sacrosanct relics, will be “deconsecrated”, and fall out of arthood. Since it is maintained by secular rather than transcendental authority, arthood can make no pretence to being a permanent state of being, it is, rather, a life cycle.

Norman Hogg and I have speculated at length upon the material-relational implications of Geary and Hanh’s work on relics and reliquaries for contemporary art theory and practice. For us, art that practices the cultural biography of things, (re)locates, implaces and authenticates the object as ‘a relational hub or conduit within a network of inter-human subjectivities.’ (Neoflagellants 2013, 189) Borrowing Hahn’s neologism, we refer to the anthropocentric practice of embodying human relations in objects as ‘relic-ing’. (Hahn 2011, 9) Relic-ing is a residual medievalism: unremarkable materials are regularly and knowingly relic-ed by artists and curators to become nodes in intersubjective networks that, in turn, exert their *own* agency. Relics, in other words, may ‘relic’ us.

Relic-ing, of course, can also be a ‘medievalization’. For example, the appearance of a *Hand Reliquary* in Leckey’s ...*Dumb Things* invites comparison with Hahn’s 2011 exhibition *Objects of Devotion and Desire: Medieval Relic to Contemporary Art* (Hahn 2011). Both Leckey and Hahn deliberately drew together reliquaries and contemporary artworks to suggest untimely analogies between medieval rituals of object veneration and the

relational transfiguration of objects practised in contemporary secular cultures. (See also: Hahn 2012 and 2017).

I will now turn to consider *dOCUMENTA (13)* to extend this analogy by considering if it, as a contemporary “reliquary”, might be said to have assisted artists in relic-ing matter that is - in the *exempla* I have chosen to focus on - ‘merely’ rubbish or stone. Assuming that ‘an audience is essential’, I will consider how the reception of *dOCUMENTA (13)* in/authenticated the vitalist practices pursued by the exhibition’s curator and artists.

Like *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia*, *dOCUMENTA (13)* professed to being as concerned with the material-temporal qualities of non-art (animal, mineral, vegetable) as it was with artefacts and artworks. However, where Gioni focused on the many ways that such matter is susceptible to being collected and compiled for *human* contemplation, *dOCUMENTA (13)*’s curator Christov-Bakargiev was more captivated by the animism of vibrant materialism (Bennett 2010), presenting non/artistic and a/biotic “things” as agents within heterogeneous networks.¹² In this, *dOCUMENTA (13)*’s partially revised contemporary art’s manifest social constructivism, its underlying supposition that knowledges are actively socially constructed rather than unearthed from a mind-independent universe.¹³ Christov-Bakargiev attested that social constructivism’s frameworks of contingent knowledges were not so much disappearing from contemporary art discourse, they were, rather, being re-assembled as considerations of non-social and/or more-than-social relations.

dOCUMENTA (13)’s centrepiece, Song Dong’s earthwork *Doing Nothing Garden* (2010-12) was a poster-boy for Christov-Bakargiev’s interpretation of vibrant materialism. The installation consisted of two 20ft high dishevelled mounds of landfill dumped upon the highly manicured lawn of Kassel’s Karlsaue Park. Abandoned by the artist, the trash was

colonised by plants, transforming slowly to resemble Chinese landscape painting. Dong's Taoist practise of "non-action" allowed organic decomposition to "compose" the work (Dong 2012). The paradoxical action of 'doing nothing' encouraged the land to scape itself, producing a spectacle that competed for attention with Karlsaue's Baroque and English Romantic landscaping.

While *Doing Nothing Garden* undoubtedly still 'relics' intersubjective human relations through landscaping, it is equally concerned with its autobiography, with a bio-agency that is less dependent on human relations. *Doing Nothing Garden* might be said to be 'more about tracing effects, or what has de facto happened genealogically to the work through its journey in time and space.' (Karlholm 2016, 45) By relinquishing his artistic processes to biotic and non-artefactual ambience, Dong's self-assembling garden explicitly challenged the *human-centred* flow of object-biography by prompting a more object-oriented focus on what the colony was *becoming*. Dong's provocation is echoed by Christov-Bakargiev who suggested that while we still tend to *read* objects as repositories of (human) narratives, we should also regard them as narrative participants:

When an artwork is looked at closely, [...] the phenomenology of that viscous experience allows the mind to merge with matter, and slowly, possibly, to see the world not from the point of view of the discerning subject, the detached subject, but from within so-called objects and outward. (Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke 2012)

Indeed, Dong's humble licensing of plant life to take over his composition dissembled human waste, territorialising it as verdure substrata. Thus we are, *perhaps*, more likely to appreciate the landfill from the biotic perspective of what it hosts.

Doing Nothing Garden, gives a flavour of how *dOCUMENTA (13)*'s manifest curatorial strategy might be read as a nonmodern attempt to disrupt the anthropocentrism of the cultural turn and present a world-view in which all things are actants with agentic possibilities. Indeed, in terms of its critical reception, *dOCUMENTA (13)* was seen to canonise and officially embroider the Great Schism that non-representational and post-anthropocentric materialisms had already begun to open in the foundational discourses of contemporary art. A recurring trope in reviews was that a focus on *things* was merely a byproduct of a *lack* of attention to agents, one related directly to the decline of the human subject in neoliberalism (Bromberg 2013; Charlesworth 2013; McLean-Ferris 2013). Such critics of *dOCUMENTA (13)* saw it as presenting audiences with a stark choice of siding with objects over subjects¹⁴.

Such binarism, however, misreads both what was being advocated by Christov-Bakargiev and what was emergent within “animate” works such as *Doing Nothing Garden*. Dong enlists unremarkable vibrant matter, not to venerate it over the human *dasein*, but, rather, to allow it to ‘relic’ us, its audience. The transfiguration of the rubbish heap only occurs when it entangles human relations, enabling it to be contemplated as a horticultural art installation and/or as an *exempla* of natural history. From an anthropocentric perspective, *Doing Nothing Garden*'s growth, its agency, its transfiguration remains tied to it activating and embodying human relations.¹⁵

Might unsubstantiated critical anxieties regarding vibrant materialism be symptomatic of a deeper fear of the premodern (Holsinger 2007). The high-profile “resurfacing” of animism (Franke 2010) in curatorial practice,¹⁶ certainly, represented a visible threat to the

modern episteme and thus to the very existence of art. However, adopting a long-term nonmodern perspective (DeLanda 1997), it's clear that vitalism never went away; there was nothing "new" about *dOCUMENTA (13)*'s vibrant materialism. For example, contemporaneously, the anthropologist Tim Ingold posited that: '...there never has been a time when all sorts of nonhumans have not been enrolled in the tasks of keeping life going. What has changed is the nature of the non-humans.' (Ingold 2012, 430)¹⁷ Scaling-down Ingold's view that there are no 'objects', only 'material flows and currents of sensory awareness within which both ideas and things reciprocally take shape' (Ingold 2011, 11) allows us to note just how easily things can fall in and out of arthood. As things tumble and flow through *biennale*, they are but momentarily enmeshed in, and reveal, the dominant values of allegedly "globalised" *contemporary art*.

What, then, of things that withdraw, that resist passage through the *biennale*? Does this prevent their temporary transfiguration into arthood? A pertinent example is Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolás Goldberg's *El Chaco* proposal. This involved moving a 37-ton meteorite from Campo del Cielo in Argentina to *dOCUMENTA (13)* in Germany, a quasi-medieval act of *furta sacra* (Geary 1978). In the event, this project was abandoned since the aboriginal Chaco communities, who are the meteorite's custodians, protested its transfer to *dOCUMENTA (13)*. The artists Faivovich and Goldberg were forced to conclude that even temporarily removing contact with Moqoit territory would have rendered it inert. However, the project was not aborted solely out of respect for the Chaco community's rights. Pressure from the scientific community to preserve the stone for future generations outweighed any curatorial assurances of custodianship that *dOCUMENTA (13)* could muster. Beyond the exoticising grasp of the *biennale*, its ancient extra-terrestrial *virtus* protected by the Argentinian constitution and the global scientific community, the *El Chaco* meteorite

maintained its animate status as an alien source of abundance and power.

The failure to realise this Duchampian readymade reminds us of the ways in which different agencies compete for a thing's attention. In this case, the curiosity of a contemporary artistic community was regarded by Argentina's government and (belatedly) the artists Faivovich and Goldberg to be subservient to the veneration of the Chaco aborigines and the scientific community. In the *dOCUMENTA (13)* catalogue, Christov-Bakargiev afforded agency to the meteorite by asking if - a cosmological relic (older than the earth) with a unique history - it had 'rights'. (Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke 2012) While she was widely ridiculed for anthropomorphising the meteorite, Christov-Bakargiev correctly identified her need to appeal to its quasi-subjecthood.

While *Faivovich and Goldberg's El Chaco* did not materialise in Kassel, the *disjecta membra* survives as a quasi art work (Faivovich 2012) since the metadiscourse generated around the controversy of temporarily relocating the meteorite, part at of its rich object biography, is in itself an object enmeshed within *dOCUMENTA (13)*. The speculative *proposal* is more worthy of further scrutiny than the feedback it generated for itself within *dOCUMENTA (13)* because the proposal is symptomatic of *contemporary art's* hidden social constructivist agenda.

Had it travelled to Europe, the meteorite would have been available simultaneously as evidence of pre-earth lithic matter (a concern of "modern" cosmology/geology) and as the object of veneration among Argentina's aboriginal Chaco communities (a concern of "nonmodern" vitalism). *dOCUMENTA (13)*, seems to play devil's advocate here, taking neither epistemological side. Certainly, a corollary of globalisation and de-colonisation is that

biennale increasingly operate on a meta-level, “impartially” representing objects that attract the attentions of competing epistemologies. (Karlholm 2016, 41)

Not explicitly foregrounded here is the fact that *dOCUMENTA (13)* is, equally, a site of veneration, one in which objects such as of *El Chaco* are received viewed through the meshworks of contemporary art. For one, physically located within *dOCUMENTA (13)*, *El Chaco* would primarily be viewed as Faivovich and Goldberg’s practice, one sanctified by Christov-Bakargiev’s enveloping curatorial liturgy (or “reliquary”). The *El Chaco* “relic” would have been substantially re-animated by the Faivovich-Goldberg-*dOCUMENTA (13)* reliquary, (or, more specifically, *lapidary*.) Since this reliquary performs a synthesis of antithetical epistemologies, the freshly entangled *El Chaco* object it would relic would be akin to a merger: *dOCUMENTA (13)-Faivovich-Goldberg-El Chaco*. Realising such an amalgamation would have been a performance of contemporary art’s transfigurative powers when coupled with the globalising, homogenising leverage of *biennale*. The failure to realise the project demonstrates that this power is, as yet, far from absolute, that some things may remain outside of representation.

The collapse of the project, inadvertently, draws more to attention to the ways in which extrasomatic lithic matter ‘embedded with networks of agency in which what they can and cannot do - where they may and may not move, what they desire and what they can achieve - is simultaneously constrained and enabled by other actors within that reticulation: humans, rivers, angels, animals, intensities of heat and light...’ (Cohen 2010, 60) To borrow Fowler and Harris’ formulation, the foundering of Faivovich-Goldberg’s project does ‘justice to the way in which certain kinds of relations affect us enduringly through time’ and, crucially important for contemporary art, demonstrates that ‘some aspects of the present may

become absent' (Fowler and Harris 2015, 132).

What allows such proposed *furta sacra* to pass off its charged perspective as “neutral”? Perhaps contemporary art - anointed of its late modernist patricide - has never fully exonerated itself from modernist aestheticism, nor fully dispensed with modernism's epistemicidal proclivities? One way of approaching this question is to consider contemporary art's *chronopolitics*, 'the relationship between political behaviour of individuals and groups and their time-perspectives.' (Wallis 1970, 102). To what extent is contemporary art continuous with modernism's time-perspectives? Do contemporary art *biennale* such as *Documenta* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* embrace or reject *nonmodern* temporal relations?

Modernism harboured complex relations with temporality. Chrysi Papaioannou argues that 'the status of the avant-garde's relationship to historical time ought to be considered as an articulation of “afterness”: that is, as a constitutive split between historical continuity and historical rupture.' (Papaioannou 2017, 12) While some modernists heralded another Year One (Futurists, Constructivists) others consciously rejected temporal ruptures (“anachronists” such as Bataille). This has consequences for forms of contemporary art that, in setting their critical sights on deconstructing supercessionist modernist epistemicide (the 'avant-garde-as-historical-rupture'), tend to neglect perspectives on 'avant-garde-as-historical-continuity'. In so doing, is contemporary art blind to the residual nonmodern temporalities it hosts?

The rise of contemporary art, art theory and curatorial practice is tightly bound with its nascent postmodern chrono-revisionism. In the early 1960s, George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* (Kubler 1962) established a temporal framework for art history 'capable of including non-Western artefacts.' (Kernbauer 2017, 4) At the same time, philosophically-minded MFA-trained artists began to critically challenge the chronopolitics of art history by publishing

their own innovative art theory. (Kernbauer 2017, 6) In the 1970s and '80s, it was contemporary art and art theory, rather than art history, that set the agenda for the 'post-historical' speculation of Belting (Belting 1987) and Danto (Danto 1997). Contemporary art theory's concern with chronopolitics re-emerged contemporaneously with *Documenta (13)* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia*. For example, at the turn of the 2010's the art historian Terry Smith published a number of influential volumes on the 'contemporaneous' of art and curating (Smith, 2008 and 2012) while, in parallel, the philosopher Peter Osborne focused his attention on 'temporalization' (Osborne, 2013a and 2013b). It is no coincidence, then, that *Documenta (13)* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* should have been, in their different ways, fixated with the chronopolitics of art, seeking to surface, re-articulate art's relationships with different time perspectives:

'I came to the conclusion that I had to make it [*Il Palazzo Encyclopedia*] less about being contemporary and more about the coexistence of diverse temporalities, since today being contemporary also means having access to history in a completely different manner. (Massimiliano Gioni in Bonami 2013)'

As I've already demonstrated, *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* and *Documenta (13)* followed what, by the end of the 1990s, was a well-established anachronic curatorial practice of uniting the premodern and the contemporary, artefacts and *naturalia* under a common rubric. While such comparative analysis was by no means unfamiliar to modernist 'anachronists', modernism's dominant temporal framework remains allied in the popular imagination with futuro-modernity, a culture that precipitated conscious ideological otherings of the "premodern". Such othering involves rupturing time into pre/modern epochs and ordering them as processual. Given that the kind of supercessionism exemplified in Alfred Barr's

infamous 1935 teleology had long become anathema by the 21st century, Gioni and Christov-Bakargiev's chrono-promiscuity should not have raised an eyebrow. (Assuredly, the bulk of artworld critical rancour focused on their embrace of "non-art" and post-humanism.)

What Gioni describes as 'the coexistence of diverse temporalities' aligns his curating with a broad chronologic for structuring time that is more commonly characterised as "presentist". Among the modern-minded disciplinarians of art history, the chronologic of presentism continues to invoke deep suspicion. For example, to the art historian Hal Foster, the medievalist correspondences that Nagel's book *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time* (2012) invites are little more than 'pseudomorphic resemblances', 'prefiguring' or 're-entering' the now. (Foster 2012). Since Nagel's 'presentist' concept of art out of time echoes the, by now, orthodox anachronic curatorial practices of *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* and *Documenta (13)* it is beneficial to step to one side of biennaleology and contemporary art theory, and examine presentism from the perspective of contemporaneous debates within Medievalisms Studies.

As a chronologic, presentism is historically relative, it isn't exclusively practiced in the here-and-now:

Presentism is widely understood to mean the practice of representing, interpreting, and, more importantly, evaluating the past according the values, standards, ambitions, and anxieties of a later "present". It is a core concept for medievalism studies, this being because it is arguably the essence of medievalism itself, unifying the enormously varied ways the Middle Ages has been represented in the postmedieval cultural afterlife. (D'Arcens 2014, 181)

The presentism at stake in anachronic curatorial practices ‘is critical here because, for scholars working in the vein of a certain traditional historicism, the Middle Ages is always Other to the present’. (Joy 2010, 293) For Foster, the modernist-premodern practices Nagel highlights must be *naïvely* ‘presentist’ on precisely such grounds. However, could it not be that Foster’s alteritism - one allied with ‘avant-garde-as-historical-rupture’ - requires he ‘other’ the premodern by discounting the persistence of residual medievalisms and rejecting medievalizations as “inauthentic” pseudomorphs?

Medievalisms Studies offers contemporary art many other temporal possibilities. If *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour and Porter 1993), then might contemporary art be reawakening to its nonmodern *longue durée*? Rather than only see discontinuities with the past, the concept of residual medievalisms, at least, allows us to speculate on continuities across the “modern partition”.¹⁸ Indeed, the medievalist Eileen Joy neatly summarises that ‘for some scholars working in studies in medievalism, “the medieval” (whatever that might ultimately mean) is always partly a function, product and effect of any particular present trying to grapple with the epistemologies of the Middle Ages as well as with its relation (or supposed non-relation) to the modern and postmodern.’ (Joy 2010, 293)

As a scholar of the Renaissance, not only is Nagel critical of the *naïvely* presentist chronologic that Foster decries, he is particularly wary of Foster’s nascent homotemporality. For Nagel, modernist engagement with its constitutive premodern enabled ‘real cross-temporal encounters, acts of material resistance to historical logic.’ (Nagel 2012, 23) Nagel seeks to ensure that we should not allow dominant narratives of modernist discontinuity to overshadow modernism’s heterotemporalities. Nagel’s *Medieval Modern* thus traces some of modernism’s inquests into space-time over their explicit elective affinities with premodern

space-time. This project – investigating heterotemporal possibilities – is simultaneously pursued within Medievalisms Studies. For example, in *How Soon is Now?*, Carolyn Dinshaw argues that nonmodern ‘temporal repertoires - okay call them queer’ (Dinshaw 2012, 6) dislocate the forms of linear temporality too readily associated with the modern constitution. Dinshaw demonstrates the many ways that medieval cultures experienced ‘asynchrony: different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment of now.’ (Dinshaw 2012, 5) Considered as an experience of “now”, such premodern asynchrony is a phenomenon that significantly challenges and broadens our understanding of “contemporaneity”. Indeed, Nagel reminds us that ‘medievalia’ (Utz 2017, 3) ‘exposed modern art to figurations of a premodern temporal consciousness’ that offered ‘nothing less than alternative models of time.’ (Nagel 2012, 23) Like some of their modernist ancestors, today’s artists and curators, equally refuse to accept ‘*their adversaries’ temporal playing field. Another field - much broader, much less polemical has opened up before us: the field of nonmodern worlds. It is the Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known.*’ (Latour and Porter 1993, 48)

The anachronic methods practiced by scholars such as Nagel and Dinshaw and curators such as Gioni and Christov-Bakargiev should not be confused with *naïve anachronism*. From their anachronic perspective, the present cannot be easily demarcated from the past or future, for the premodern has remained animate (‘residual’) throughout the postmedieval era. This is partly infrastructural - there are copious political and legal continuities (Utz 2017) - and partly because the modern constantly re-invents, fictions and performs premoderns as its “other”.¹⁹ Attuned to the residual and cyclical ‘afterlife’ of things, anachronic history ‘opens up a new sensitivity for the project of determining the temporalities of historical works of art’ (Karlholm 2016, 45)

From an anachronic historical perspective, the postmedieval is unavoidably engaged in ‘medievalization’, *staging* the premodern. Indeed, medievalisms - including, the term ‘medieval’ (Matthews 2011, 695) - are postmedieval concepts of premodern pasts. A self-consciously anachronic perspective, thus, discounts current art from imaging itself as ‘a vantage point from which to revise the (distant) past’ (Foster 2012), regarding *any* modern teleology that aims to disentangle ‘psuedomorphic’ medievalia from (preposterous)²⁰ encounters with the “authentic” medieval to be an overly ‘homogenous meta-temporality’ (Osborne 2013a, 31).

‘An anachronic perspective, a bi- or polychronic situatedness of the work of art, could be used to liberate art from being defined according to its unique descent, and to embrace, instead, a chronologic open to art’s continuous “life” through its successive aesthetic accessions and actualizations in time.’ (Karlholm 2016, 36)

Certainly, contemporary art projects, such the speculative *dOCUMENTA 13-Faivovich-Goldberg-El Chaco*, ask us to consider materialities asynchronously as a ‘coming together of *different, but equally “present”* temporalities’. (Osborne 2013a, 44) Such ‘heterotemporal’ (Hutchings 2008, 172) (Klinke, 2013, 681-685) projects may be helpfully considered as nonmodern in parallel with medievalisms. Dinshaw’s asynchrony, as a form of presentism, corresponds with the chronopolitics of *dOCUMENTA 13* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* wherein ‘the present is never synchronic, but always anachronic’ (Hutchings 2008, 67) and art works are free to enjoy promiscuous temporal relations. Making the art of all times available in the present, the ‘transtime’ (Boyle 2010) of contemporary *biennale* is ‘ideally suited to producing temporal incongruities and heterogeneities and observing them in

other domains of life' (Kernbauer 2017, 9).

A comparable presentist asynchrony that has methodological relevance to both medievalisms and contemporary art is developed in *Untimely Matter*, wherein J. Gill Harris proposes an untimely, polytemporal continuum, encountering materials as manifestations of 'palimpsested time'. 'In its polychronicity, an object can prompt many different understandings and experiences of temporality - that is, of the relations between now and then, old and new, before and after.' (Harris 2009, 4) The technical and material repertoire available to the contemporary artist is untimely in its potential to materialise chrono-diversity. This is due less to the fact that contemporary art's repertoire is historically expansive - encompassing *technê* and media emergent over millennia - and more to *how* this repertoire is practised in ways that refuse to accommodate Romantic temporal alterity.

Such untimely matter, however, is not the exclusive preserve of art. The failure to realise the *El Chaco* project and the difficulties that many had with anachronic curatorial and artistic perspectives manifest in *dOCUMENTA 13* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* amplifies ways in which contemporary art is still struggling to fully reconcile itself with nonmodern 'chrono-diversity'. (Virilio and Rose 2011, 74) Arguably, many of the objects relic-ed in the name of contemporary art by these *biennale* manifested far greater 'thing-power' as *non-artworks*. For example, left to its devices as a non-art work, the *El Chaco* meteorite, generates its own magic circle, drawing other things into its dynamic polytemporal rhythms, making its matter full of future possibilities for 'supersession, explosion, and conjunction' (Harris 2009, 146)

Drifting back and forth between cultural materialism and a vitalist materialism, *dOCUMENTA 13* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* diluted the paradigm that has sustained

contemporary art: the Cultural Turn. In recognition of this, the art historian Katy Siegel has located current art periodically *after* contemporary art.²¹ Such supercessionist periodisations, however, are exemplars of modernism's 'peculiar propensity for understanding time that passes as if it were really abolishing the past behind it.' (Latour and Porter 1993, 68) Current art clearly has not abandoned the 'polychronic remainder' of the 'not-now'. (Harris 2009, 29), nor can it, for 'then is always and forever part of now'. (Karlholm 2016, 38) In their agential realism, *dOCUMENTA 13* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* developed a nonmodern vibrant materialism, a reciprocal 'object practice' (Humphries 2014), that connects with premodern vitalisms (relic-ing) in which person-things were mutually enmeshed.

The chronopolitics of *dOCUMENTA 13* and *Il Palazzo Encyclopedia* drifted from the timely "just-now", bound by human finitude, towards a long-now that outlives and eludes us, a geological scale in which the people of the middle ages 'are our exact contemporaries'. (Cohen 2010, 59) In the anachronic present, every *thing* may come to seem contemporary with us. *In medias res*, matter is falling in and out of arthood.

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1. Residual medievalisms contrast with what Alexander Nagel calls ‘instances of deliberate medievalism’ found in modernism. (Nagel 2012, 22) I will adapt Prendergast’s neologism ‘medievalization’ to similar ends, considering ‘deliberate’ medievalisms as ‘theory-fictions that facilitate ludic speculation on nonmodern futurities.’

confraternityofneoflagellants.org.uk

2. This is equally evident in Medievalisms Studies. For example, in *Getting Medieval*, Caroline Dinshaw performed a premodern/postmodern comparative studies *vis a vis* sexuality. (Dinshaw, 1999)

3. Founded by Marieke van Hal in 2009, the supranational International Biennale Association www.biennialfoundation.org has solicited the establishment of Biennology, the scholarly study of large scale international exhibitions. See Kompatsiaris, 2017 and *Seismopolite Journal of Art and Politics* #6 www.seismopolite.com

4. dOCUMENTA is a ‘massive, temporally and geographically dispersed event’ [...] that it is ‘far beyond the ability of any one spectator to behold’. (Masters 2012, 128) dOCUMENTA 13, for example, granted its *bullas* to Alexandria (Egypt), Banff (Canada) and Kabul (Afghanistan) as its sanctioned sites of artistic pilgrimage, anointing them in its *mappa mundi* as a constituent part of its own domain. In International Relations, such supranational territorialisation is considered a quintessentially neomedieval bid for overlordship. (Friedrichs 2001)

5. In this, Gioni extends the dialogue between the new museology and the practices of ‘museological art’ in the 1990s. See: Vergo 1989; Weschler 1996; McShine 1999

6. “It best reflects the giant scope of this international exhibition,” Mr. Gioni said, “the impossibility of capturing the sheer enormity of the art world today.” (Vogel 2013)

7. See: longnow.org

8. Artists featured include: Ed Atkins, Louise Bourgeois, Prunella Clough, John Gerrard, Robert Gober, Nicola Hicks, Roger Hiorns, Alex Hubbard, Dwight Mackintosh, Pierre Molinier, James Rosenquist, Jim Shaw, William Blake, John Tenniel and Tøyen.

9. An example of object-biography in practice drawn from the broader 2013 Venice Biennale is the Catalanian national Pavillion 25%, a project curated by curator Jordi Balló, artist Francesc Torres and filmmaker Mercedes Álvarez in association with the MACBA (Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona). Herein eight unemployed Catalans each chose a work from the MACBA permanent collection. By engaging with the making, use and future life of their chosen object, they articulate their own subjects of inquiry.

10. See: Dickie 1999 and Becker 1982

11. Danto's take on the veneration of the neodada readymade in the early 1960s is akin to the logic of relic-ing. Danto's loaded use of the medievalism 'transfiguration' (Danto 1981) as a heuristic is a medievalization that invokes the social processes that elevated things into authenticated relics. Interestingly, Nagel inverts Danto's speculative axiom, proposing that 'The relic's structural role in the medieval image economy [...] comes into view differently when the logic of the readymade is brought to bear on the question.' (Nagel 2012, 22)

12. This, in itself, can be regarded as an operational bias in relation to the broader contemporaneous debates within the new materialisms. For example, rather than foreground the way in which things *withdraw*, art exhibitions such as *dOCUMENTA (13)* continued to emphasise the way in which they are *entangled*.

13. An influential example of social constructivism was relational aesthetics, ... 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.'

(Bourriaud 1998, 113)

14. Quite literally in the case of Charlesworth 2014

15. Given that contemporary art is a field so frequently dedicated to promoting human exceptionalism, it is unsurprising that it proved difficult for *biennale* to pass themselves off as actors of no fixed ontology.

16. See Anselm Franke's *Animism. Exhibition, Conference* 16 March–6 May 2012, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) Berlin; and Nicolas Bourriaud's *The Great Acceleration: Art in the Anthropocene*. Taipei Biennial 2014. (Bourriaud 2014)

17. Similarly, the medievalist Jeffrey Cohen argued that 'human identity has always depended upon and been sustained by dispersive networks of actors and objects, meshworks that prevent the human from ever possessing a finite form, an unchanging ontology, a diminutive boundlessness.' (Cohen 2010, 58)

18. Nagel wisely cautions here against *only* seeing continuities: 'The object is not to deepen the register of historical influences or to retrieve a new set of legitimising precursors for modern practice, thus rendering it traditional and familiar after all, but to activate a wider set of reference points that cannot be arranged chronologically. The practitioners of modern art themselves provided some good tools for dealing with these relationships.' (Nagel 2012, 22)

19. 'The alterity of the Middle Ages continues to secure, for modernity, its intelligibility to itself...' (Fradenburg 1997, 211)

20. Preposterous in so far as the "authentic" is a decidedly modern form of presentism, for 'there was no conceptual room for forgery in a copy culture'. (Nagel 2012, 235)

21. Siegel makes this point in relation to the impact of the new materialisms: 'It's over: the contemporary was a brief period, a moment in the short American century when

historical amnesia combined with postwar prosperity to flash like a strobe light on the entire world.’ (Siegel 2013).